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ABSTRACT

This fact sheet focuses on stress, stress in children and adolescents, and stress management in the schools. Relaxation training for young people is discussed and elements in the implementation of a relaxation training program are considered, including personnel, inservice, time, materials, and basic relaxation procedures. A sample stress management model for secondary students is presented. (NB)

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HIGHLIGHTS

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...An ERIC/CAPS Fact Sheet

Counseling Youngsters for Stress Management

Stress Points to Bear in Mind

• "Stress is essentially the wear and tear on the body caused by life at any one time." (Dr. Hans Selye, international authority on stress.)

• The secret of healthy stress is to achieve a match between stressors and the individual's current response capabilities. In other words, one person's distress may be another person's challenge.

• Our perception of stressors as excessive or threatening produces a variety of physical symptoms; e.g., increased heart rate, tenseness in the stomach, sweaty palms, headaches, loss of appetite, and insomnia. Emotional effects such as anxiety, depression and hopelessness can result from long-term or diffuse stress, as well as from specific traumatic events.

• Stress management refers to physical and cognitive coping techniques. Examples include: relaxation training (breathing and muscle control); appropriate diet, exercise and rest; non-abuse of drugs and other substances; cognitive restructuring or rescripting (a process of examining our beliefs and changing our silent self-talk); time management; goal setting; biofeedback; guided imagery; and various meditation and yoga disciplines.

Stress in Children and Adolescents

The increasingly complex demands of living in a fast-paced, fast-changing society fall equally upon children, adolescents and adults. In fact, young people may have a harder time because they have even less control of their world. Their adaptive mechanisms and strategies are less well developed, and their homes, schools and communities are run by adults who sometimes forget or minimize the terrors of growing up.

Typical stressors for youngsters include: prolonged absence of a parent, separation, or divorce; change in parent's health or employment; change in family responsibility or income; addition or loss of a sibling; family vacations (or lack of them); loss of a friend; death of a pet; illness and injury; physical growth and puberty; change of teacher or school; changes within the school system, such as in the lunch programs or busing arrangements; academic difficulties and successes; racial or cultural tensions; and peer pressure and developmental issues. Special needs groups may face additional, unique stressors.

While stress responses in young people may be primarily physical, disruptions in thinking/learning and in social relationships are also likely to occur. Test and performance anxiety, lack of concentration, and persistent anti-social or disruptive behavior are some of the most common non-physical manifestations of stress.

Stress Management in Schools

Stress management programs in elementary and secondary schools have been established as part of the health or social studies curriculum and in counselor-led group sessions. Non-curricular stress counseling is also conducted on an as-needed individual basis. The overall goals of these efforts are similar: to help students learn about causes and sources of stress, physiological and psychological reactions to stress, and effective coping techniques. The sessions can also be used to lead students in activities related to decision making, problem solving, responsible self-direction, health management, and interpersonal skill development. In addition to these individual coping measures, systematic approaches are necessary to help identify and reduce stressors in the educational setting.

Relaxation Training for Young People

Learning to relax at will is one of the most valuable stress management techniques because the relaxation response is incompatible with anxiety. In other words, a mind/body condition results that alleviates the usual psychological and physiological stress responses. Moreover, research indicates that relaxation training produces improvement in a number of areas: in students' self-management and self-concept, in creative and other right-hemispheric abilities of the brain, and in certain aspects of achievement. For example, students can learn to reduce test anxious behavior and thus improve the cognitive process. A ripple effect is the improvement of school grades which in time enhances students' self-image and perception of their ability to achieve. In turn, due to the high correlation between self-concept and productivity, school achievement may improve even further.

Implementation of a Relaxation Training Program

Personnel: No extra staff are required to implement a relaxation training program, but an attitude change may be in order. The staff must believe (1) that the student has the potential to learn to control the internal functions of the mind, body, and emotional state; (2) that relaxation training develops an important coping technique, if not a modern survival skill; and (3) that effective use of the skill requires daily practice, especially during the first weeks of learning.

Inservice: The amount of inservice varies with the staff's existing knowledge and skills. Some may need as many as 15 hours of inservice work with both theory and first-hand experience. Others may require little more than orientation sessions on adapting stress management to the needs of young people. Program monitoring after start-up can help identify any additional training needs among the staff.

Time: The amount of time devoted to relaxation exercises is approximately 15-20 minutes once or twice a day. Research shows that youngsters relax more quickly than the average adult, so long periods are not needed. However, specific times for practice (preferably first thing in the morning and immediately after lunch) seem to contribute to greater effectiveness.

Materials: From the variety of techniques that have been developed to induce the relaxation response, several exercise programs have been specifically designed for youngsters and made available on cassette tapes. Exercises that combine autogenic and visual imagery techniques appear to be

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superior, once the meaning of tense and relaxed muscles and the physiological signs of relaxation are understood. Inexpensive biofeedback devices, e.g., wrist temperature and galvanic skin response indicators, may increase motivation to learn the exercises, but the devices are optional.

Basic relaxation procedure for individuals and groups (with or without tapes): Tense each muscle area for about 8-10 seconds and relax for 30-40 seconds. Complete the tension-relaxation phase for each area before moving on to the next, according to the following sequence:

Forehead — raise eyebrows high, relax.
Eyes — squint tight, relax.
Jaw — clench teeth, pulling jaw downward; relax.
Back of neck — push chin down on chest, relax.
Shoulders — press back against chair or floor, relax.
Upper arm — tense the "Popeye" muscle, relax.
Lower arm — clench fist tightly, relax.
Upper torso — tighten rib cage, relax.
Lower torso — tighten buttocks, relax.
Upper leg — lift feet slightly off floor, relax.
Lower leg — point toes toward ceiling with heel on floor, relax.
Feet — curl toes, relax.

During the tension phase, it is important to pay attention to the sensation of tenseness and tightness. During the relaxation phase, the muscles must be totally relaxed. It is helpful to think of words and images that suggest a relaxed state, such as calm, peaceful, or lying on soft, thick grass on a warm, sunny day. There is no "right" way to do the exercises. What is important is the alternation of tension and relaxation with enough time and attention to experience each state and each muscle area separately. With practice, students may have a feeling of disorientation at the completion of the exercises. This indicates a deeper state of relaxation, and they can easily re-orient after a few minutes of sitting quietly.

Sample Stress Management Model for Secondary Students

Introduction. Goal: Understand that stress is a natural response which everyone experiences throughout life. (1) Define the goals of the stress management sessions. (2) Develop an awareness of the variety of ways that our thoughts, activities, and perceptions of environmental events create stress (e.g., start keeping a log of stress-producing events). (3) Define stress, using an illustration of physiological stress and a discussion guide. The goal of the discussion guide is to understand the relationship between stress and various types of life experiences, with the following objectives: (a) differentiate between specific and non-specific responses of the body; (b) demonstrate that from the point of view of stress production, it is immaterial whether the event is pleasant or unpleasant, as the physiological process to restore equilibrium remains the same. (4) Realize that others have similar stressful experiences. This is especially important for young people who are often unaware that most of their peers are having comparable feelings.

Recognition of Stress Symptoms. Goal: Understand that stress reactions appear with a variety of symptoms which vary in nature and intensity according to the force of the stressor and our physical and emotional condition. (1) Develop the ability to recognize individual symptoms in order to initiate appropriate stress reduction behavior. (2) Identify some specific symptoms; e.g., rapid breathing and/or heartbeat, perspiration, lump in the throat, knot in the stomach, trembling hands, shivers and shakes.

Effects of Stress on the Body. Goal: Understand the relationship between stress and the development of physical illness. (1) Delineate the body's stress reaction, culminating in the release of such hormones as cortisol. (2) Describe the implications of an increased flow of cortisol. For example, excess cortisol interferes with the natural production of antibodies and, according to some evidence, may be related to allergies, hypertension, atherosclerosis, and gastric ulcers.

Coping: Stress Prevention/Reduction Lifestyle. Goal: Understand the importance of adopting a pattern of behavior which helps reduce stress. (1) Accept the fact that the way we behave greatly influences the amount of stress we experience. (2) Define specific behaviors which prevent or reduce stress. Examples: develop a "personal success formula" to include meaningful activities; help others; assess one's own level of ability and desire to achieve, and from these develop realistic aspirations; explore the implications of biological inequality, social inequity, and equal opportunity; be positive about the future and recall past accomplishments when faced with seemingly impossible tasks; avoid procrastination; communicate concerns in ways and at times that are conducive to problem solving; and learn to relax.

Coping: Problem Solving. Goal: Understand the importance of a systematic plan to eliminate or greatly reduce the significance of stressors. (1) Analyze the importance of learning rational techniques to help solve problems; i.e., the advantage of logical and sensible solutions over impulsive reactions. (2) Identify major components of a plan to solve a variety of problems. Most plans include the following steps: define the problem; find alternate solutions; test the solutions; evaluate the results; and, if necessary, redefine the problem. (3) Learn to apply the steps, using specific reasons for choosing among alternate solutions and concrete examples of possible consequences for each alternative.

Coping: Quieting Response. Goal: Understand that the Quieting Response (QR) is a practical relaxation technique that reverses the stress reaction and develop proficiency in the technique. Once QR is learned, it can be used at any time within 6-10 seconds without anyone else being aware of it. (1) Learn and practice the following steps: (a) recognize stress (nervousness, pounding heart, etc.); (b) say to yourself, "I can remain calm"; (c) breathe in slowly through imaginary holes in the bottom of your feet; (d) begin to exhale, relax jaw, lower tongue, permit warm air to leave through the imaginary holes in your feet; (e) imagine warmth and heaviness simultaneously with the exhale as warm air descends through neck, shoulders, arms, chest, etc. (2) Analyze why and how QR is an effective stress reduction technique. (3) Compare feelings of tension and relaxation in various muscle groups (as in the relaxation training sequence described earlier); use QR to initiate the relaxation state.

Evaluation. Conduct an evaluation after a lapse of 2-3 weeks; design questions to identify significant student behavior changes in physical, cognitive, and affective areas.

Resource Documents

Love, J. G. *Improving self-worth by learning to cope with distress. A teaching model produced for mid-adolescents in the Ann Arbor public schools.* Ann Arbor, MI: Huron High School, 1981. (ED 233 241)

Matthews, D. B., & Justice, C. *Relaxation training: A stress management model for schools.* Paper presented at the Annual Convention of the American Personnel and Guidance Association, Washington, DC, March 1983. (Includes a list of age-appropriate materials for relaxation programs in schools.) (ED 232 110)

Note: In addition to these resource documents, a list of recommended materials is available upon request. Please direct inquiries to ERIC/CAPS User Services, 2108 School of Education, The University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, MI 48109-1259 (313/764-9492).

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